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HOUSEKEEPERS' CHAT Monday, March 16, 1936

(FOR BROADCAST USE ONLY)

Subject: "SHAMROCKS AND POTATOES." Information from the Bureau of Plant Industry and the Bureau of Home Economics, United States Department of Agriculture.

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Listeners, I'm seeing green today -- bright emerald green. And my mind is in a whirl thinking of snakes -- the snakes good St. Patrick banished from Ireland, and shamrocks, and golden harps, to say nothing of Paddy's whistle, and Bridget's apron, and the Irish potato.

You can't guess why all these different things keep running through my mind unless -- you have looked at the calendar lately.

According to legend, St. Patrick himself chose the shamrock as the Irish national emblem because the 3-fold leaf suggested the Trinity to him. But Patrick was practical as well as pious. So he may have appreciated the shamrock also because it made such fine pastures and was to be responsible for Ireland's famous horses and wonderful cattle.

Many people don't know that the shamrock grows on this side of the Atlantic as well as in Ireland. Over here we have another name for it. We call it the wild white clover. And in the sections where this clover grows, it makes some of the finest pastures in this country, too. Even when other pasture grass grows along with the clover -- such grasses as blue grass, timothy, and perennial rye -- those other grasses grow better because of their association with the white clover. In experiments at the New York State College of Agriculture Kentucky blue grass grew twice as well if this clover or shamrock was growing mixed in the same sod.

You might guess that the Kentucky blue grass found some special inspiration of courage from keeping company with the blessed shamrock. But the scientists have other explanations. They say that the wild white clover, like all other clovers, has the power of drawing nitrogen from the air and fixing it in rich plant food. The blue grass -- or any other grass -- thrives on this extra nourishment that the shamrock puts into the soil. Then, too, the clover spreads out over the soil and its leaves shade the ground and make it cooler on hot sunny days. So the temperature in summer may run from 8 to 15 degrees cooler in the soil where the shamrock grows than where the grass alone is growing.

As for that other plant that we commonly associate with Ireland -- the white potato, St. Patrick had nothing to do with it. He never tasted a potato. And neither did anyone else in Ireland until Sir Walter Raleigh's expedition brought it back from South America. Maybe you have heard that Sir Walter's colonists in Virginia who returned to Ireland took it back. According to the historians of the potato, the Virginia colonists may have had sweetpotatoes, but the "Irish potato" had not yet reached North America.

The original home of the Irish potato, odd as this may seem, was in the Andean Mountains of South America. When the Spaniards made their conquest of Peru, they found the natives growing potatoes and using them as their chief article of diet. The Spanish or South American name for them was "batalas" or "papas." When old Mr. Magellan made his trip around the world, he bought some "batatas" on the coast of Brazil.

Well, the Spanish explorers brought the potato back to Spain along with other trophies of the New World. And according to the records we have of it, the potato went from Spain to Italy and from there to central Europe during the latter part of the 16th century. At about the same time, Sir Walter Raleigh's trading vessel came back to Ireland from South American ports bringing potatoes and Sir Walter started growing them on his Irish estate.

But popularity came slowly to the potato. Even the Irish took about 200 years to get used to it. Perhaps because the potato-plant is a member of the deadly nightshade family, perhaps because it was an unusual food from a foreign land, or perhaps just because no one knew how to cook it, people were shy of the potato. For many years it suffered from a bad reputation. A rumor got abroad that potatoes would shorten life and were generally unhealthy.

No wonder people didn't like potatoes at first. I don't know who invented the early potato recipes but they certainly don't appeal to me. The earliest methods of cooking potatoes were to roast and steep them in wine, or to bake them with beef-marrow and spice, or to preserve them with sirup!

You might be interested to hear what the old books had to say about the potato. The "Gardeners Kalendar" written in England in 1708 says: "The root is very near the nature of the Jerusalem artichoke though not so good and wholesome. But it may prove good for swine." Another English writer in 1754 reports: "They are despised by the rich and deemed only proper food for the meaner sort of persons."

But rich and poor alike changed their minds about the potato shortly. In 1796 the farmers in Essex County, England, grew 1700 acres for the London market. The potato vogue had begun in London. And how it spread! The Scotch began raising potatoes. The Irish began raising potatoes and presently made them their chief and often their only crop. A colony of Irish Presbyterians brought potatoes with them when they came to settle in New Hampshire. So, listeners, we owe a debt of gratitude to the Irish for bringing the potato to us.

In Germany the prejudice against potatoes was so great that the farmers refused to raise them until Frederick the Great ordered his soldiers to force people to grow potatoes. And now Germany is the greatest potato-growing country in the world. A French prisoner of war in Germany learned to like his prison-rations of potatoes and introduced potatoes to France when he returned home.

We Americans were slow about putting potatoes in our gardens and our menus, but now most American households serve potatoes more often than any other vegetable. And the nutritionists say that they are among our best energy foods. They also rate for their minerals, expecially iron, and because we eat so many of them, they are an important source of 3 vitamins.

The shamrock and the potato, then, are both important foods -- the shamrock for cattle, the potato for man.

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